THE CHALLENGES IN DISSERTATION WRITING: THE ABD PHENOMENON AND ITS POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Background: The educational landscape has been undergoing rapid transformation so much so that the pursuits for higher studies have now become the trend. Acquiring a doctoral degree is by far now considered the highest form of education which requires one to accomplish the highest form of scholarly manuscript, the dissertation. Reaching the dissertation phase is not that difficult compared to going through the dissertation writing process. This is where the "ABD" or "All but Dissertation" sets in. The aim of this review is to explore the challenges in dissertation writing and the possible solutions to address it.

Method: Research articles spanning from 2011 – 2019 were gathered to scrutinize shared and divergent views relative to challenges in dissertation writing as well the recommended solutions to address it. Two categories were framed out of these articles. The first category was CHALLENGES TO DISSERTATION WRITING: THE ABD PHENOMENON with three identified themes which are: personal factors; quality of student – supervisor relationship; and quality of research environment. The second category was the POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS ABD PHENOMENON with two identified themes which are: mentoring and advising and administrative and financial support.

Findings: The literature shows that the challenges faced by postgraduate students in dissertation writing are multifactorial which includes: personal factors that include orientation to the process, motivation as well as personal expectations; the quality of student – supervisor relationship where disconnection with expectations exists; and the quality of research environment which may be described as having problems with the setting as well as the administrative support that is provided. Possible solutions identified focused on strengthening of mentoring and advising through organized boot camps as well as provision of funding for the study.

KEYWORDS: Doctoral education, Post graduate education, dissertation writing, challenges, solutions.

THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND
INTRODUCTION:
Learning is a continuous process. It is endless so much so that the changing of the times demand for further studies. Nurses nowadays are challenge to go not only for masters' education but further into doctoral education which has been recognized as a crucial factor relative to nursing leadership particularly in the areas of service, education and its grants, research and formulation of policy. According to Ketefian (2008) as cited by Evans & Stevenson(2011), support has been given to nurses pursuing doctoral education believing that with the attainment of theses degrees, nursing leaders may be created thus having people who may initiate change and innovation.

Enrolling in the doctoral education however is not without challenges. It is an extensive process which commences from making the decision of which track to take, accomplishing needed requirements for enrolment, choosing the instructional methods i.e. distance education, face - to- face or blended, and many other considerations. But the greatest challenge is striking a balance between work demands and study demands.

Far beyond the above concern is the greatest challenge of all, dissertation writing. Arriving at this stage of doctoral education can be considered both as an academic breakthrough at the same time a tough challenge. Developing the proposal is a tedious process in itself and may be accompanied with many missteps and hitches along the way (Kilbourn, 2006).

Recognizing all these factors as a doctoral education student, this integrative review shall look into the current trends in doctoral education, its processes and protocols, the dissertation process writing, current literatures depicting the experiences and challenges of doctoral students especially those enrolled in dissertation writing, strategies that can be adopted to overcome challenges as well as present approaches to ensure successful dissertation writing.

LITERATURE SEARCH QUESTIONS:
The literature review aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges experienced by postgraduate students relative to the dissertation writing process and its completion?

2. What are the possible solutions that could address the identified challenges?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REVIEW:
With the influx of doctoral programs in the current times, the challenge of finishing it till the end through the completion of the dissertation process presents a challenge. The All But Dissertation phenomenon remains a concern.

The findings of this qualitative literature review present the various challenges faced by postgraduate students especially in the dissertation process as well as the possible solutions which can address these challenges.

METHODOLOGY
SEARCH STRATEGY:
Electronic searches of databases PUBMED, PMC (PUBMED – CENTRAL), Science Direct and Google Scholar were completed and articles were selected. The following were used as research terms: dissertation writing, doctoral education, postgraduate education, challenges. Eight articles were chosen from these searches as they fit into the inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria include peer – reviewed articles, research studies presenting actual experiences of challenges by students themselves, systematic reviews of the same area of study. Six out of the eight studies are qualitative, 1 is a mixed method study and 1 is a systematic review of literature. Using the hierarchy of evidence searching, the seven qualitative studies was given a ranked of Level 2 since the focus of inquiry is the search for meaning or experience of challenges while one article was ranked as level 1 evidence since it is a systematic review.

The review articles and studies which did not fit into the inclusion criteria which were hand searched were utilized as basis of presenting the overview of doctoral education and dissertation process which gave a background of the review.

LITERATURE FINDINGS
BACKGROUND OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION:
One of the inevitable changes that are happening to the health care system is its transformation. The health care system have now become more complex that there is a need for nurses who are well – prepared and tough in terms of their knowledge, skills and attitude. This transformation and complexity now requires 360- degree turn – around which will not only focus on the provision of excellent, quality patient care but at the same time positing a challenge to have an improvement in nursing education in order to meet this demand. In the IOM Report, The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health it was pointed out the need to improve nursing education recognizing that was learned in the 20th century may not be responsive to the 21st century. In their report, it was pointed that *"nurses should achieve higher levels of education and training through an improved education system that promotes seamless academic progression."*
The American Association Colleges of Nursing (AACN) now committed itself to strengthening nursing education by making it a priority to increase its enrolment in the research – focused and practice- focus doctoral program. This has been achieved because there has been a notable growth in the DNP program since 2006 to 2015, from 20 to 268. According to the AACN statistics of enrolment in 2014, there has been a remarkable expansion not only in the baccalaureate degree but also in the Doctoral Nursing Programs and in the Research-Focused Doctoral Programs with 26.2% and 53.8% increase respectively (Conrad & Kesten, n.d.; Jonas Philanthropies, 2015)

In Japan, there was a dramatic change in their nursing education that involved "*moving fully into the higher education system with appropriate student numbers and quality*" (Horiuchi, 2013, p5.)

This development however took a different path in Europe. According to McKenna (2018), majority of nurses in Europe who undertook PhDs were not into nursing but rather into other disciplines like Sociology and Psychology. Furthermore, nurses then criticized research PhD program in Europe pointing out its 3 weaknesses that are: *"It is completely divorced from the real world of nursing and not likely to affect them or their patients directly"; that nursing doctoral programmes must strike an equal weight of research methods and techniques when it comes to nursing knowledge, nursing scholarship and the essence of nursing*; PhD students *are isolated which makes the course have a loner environment*. (McKenna, 2018, p40)

According to Seegmiler et. al (2015)'s Trends in Doctoral Education Among Healthcare Professions: An Integrative Research Review, a new educational standard focused on clinical doctorates have taken over because of the many perks it offers in terms of employment and compensation which in turn negatively affected areas in *"research training, research productivity, diversity, and professional debt burden."(p.54)*

There are two doctoral education programs that exist, the Doctor of Nursing Practice Programs (DNP) and the Research- Focused Doctoral Programs (PhD/DNS). According to American Association Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2006) cited by Conrad & Kesten (n.d), the two doctoral programs vary in terms of their goals and graduate competencies. Based on the program of study, the DNP is focused on the preparation of leaders to achieve the highest level of nursing practice with the goal of improving patient outcomes and translating research into practice while the PhD and DNS focuses on preparing the nurses to conduct research which will promote advancement in nursing. The students enrolled in the DNP are expected to be committed to practice career and be oriented towards the improvement of outcomes for patient care and overall health of the population while those enrolled in the PhD/DNS are expected to have commitment to research career and orientation towards development of new nursing knowledge and scientific inquiry (Conrad & Kesten, n.d., p40-41)

The same programs exist in Europe and there are clear differences between the two. According to McKenna (2018), the two tracks differ mainly in terms of goals and delivery. Comparing the two, *DNS is a taught degree in which students have to pass a range of examination and coursework milestones while PhD is non-taught and students do not have to meet such milestones.*

Surprisingly however, despite these differences between the programmes, they still balance and complement each other whether in Europe or in the US. According to Conrad & Kesten, (n.d.), associating both programs where research and practice would merge can advance the profession which was likewise presented in McKenna (2018) presentation in his review where DNS and PhD students in Europe attend modules as well as seminars organized by both programs.

Inherent to the completion of the doctoral degree is the completion of dissertation writing. Dissertation writing by definition is the aggregate of solid best evidences that may ignite the curiosity of the doctoral student as well as the faculty to indulge in an in- depth and insightful scholarly activity (Thompson, 2008). Dissertation writing is the capstone or as termed by C.P.Brown, *"it is the culmination of a graduate student's academic experience".* Kilbourn (2006) on the other hand defined it as, *"a document that (in one fashion or another) makes claims (of one sort or another) that are supported (in one way or another) by argument and evidence (of one type or another)".*

According to C.P.Brown and Trudie Longren's articles published in seattlepi.com, dissertation written in the doctoral level is by far considered the highest level of research and can be considered as the highest level of academic qualification. Moreover, according to Trudie Longren, this type of research is one that is considered to add to the existing body of knowledge with the purposes of *"increasing knowledge, developing researches, training in academics and lastly employment"* particularly in the private sector.

Academic writing in the doctoral program varies from simple to the more compound and challenging types of writing which includes scholarly works such as *"proposals, journal articles, dissertations, and grant/fellowship applications* (Lavelle and Bushrow, 2007) cited by Gardner et al, (2018). Other than this, it is expected that these scholarly written articles must be peer – reviewed and published by a recognized and indexed publisher (Cable et. al, 2013) cited by Gardner et, al , (2018).

The processes or steps in dissertation writing require thorough planning. It primarily commences with in-depth review of literature, formulation of research questions and development of a timeline of the conduct of the study. This is followed by proposal writing which is submitted and presented orally to the dissertation panel for review and approval. Once approved by the panel, the proposal shall be implemented. Upon completion, final presentation and oral defense will be facilitated in front of the dissertation panel who will again review, critic, examine and approve the outcomes of the study. In most cases, this is also the time that revisions and improvements in the study will be conveyed by the panel. Depending on the degree of the revision required by the panel, the paper may be approved despite with minor revisions or may subjected to another oral presentation and defense in case of a total revision. Majority of the dissertation panel must cast their approval in the study (Ezell, 2002).

CHALLENGES IN DISSERTATION WRITING: THE "ALL –BUT- DISSERTATION" (ABD) PHENOMENON:

The desire to trail to higher education or advancement in degrees is a decision made by people out of varying motives ranging from economic to personal satisfaction and fulfilment. When one decides to study, he is placed into a position of whether or not he will complete his course of study.

According to Locke and Boyle (2016), most students do not reach graduation or are simply stuck in the completion of the academic coursework, leaving behind dissertation, a phenomenon known as "all but dissertation" or simply "ABD" in doctoral education. This is a condition where the students halt in their program of study, in the dissertation part in particular, simply because the student is faced with many factors that challenge his capacity to write a scholarly paper.

Personal Factors:
Various factors may be considered which explain the troubles faced by the doctoral student in accomplishing his dissertation. A primary consideration as a source of challenge would be personal factors relative to the student's process of adjustment in the dissertation process period. According to the study of Locke & Boyle (2016, p179), four themes emerged from their study which are identified influencers on the student's move towards completion of the dissertation: *(1) Not knowing how to start; (2) Writing barriers; (3) Challenges with advisors; and (4) Finding the time* . Another challenge a student may experience during the process of dissertation writing is the feeling of *"social isolation"* whereby he (student) experiences as defined by Hortulanus et. al.(2006) as having *"the lack of meaningful relationship which influences his quality of life"* (Carter – Veale et. al. 2016, p10). A study conducted by Harsch (2008) pointed out on three social constructs, self – efficacy, locus of control and self – handicapping which was defined in the study as *"person's judgment about being able to perform a particular activity"* (Bandura, 1977); *"generalized belief about the extent to which behaviors influence outcomes as in the case of dissertation writing internal locus of control is needed to ensure that "outcomes are contingent on their actions and largely under their control"* (Rotter, 1966) and *identification barriers, exaggerates handicaps and embraces any factor that reduces personal responsibility for the task or performance* (Jones & Berglas, 1978) respectively. The study revealed that these 3 constructs influences the time on task completion of the dissertation.

Students enrolled in the postgraduate level set their expectations relative to the structure of the programme of study where focus is on issues relative to professional nursing and research parallel to the doctorate level however, more often than not these set expectation are not met (Evans & Stevenson, 2011).

Student – Supervisor Relationship:
On the other hand, another challenge would focus on the working relationship between the dissertation supervisor and the student. Students in six universities in United Kingdom who were part of the qualitative research of Evans & Stevenson (2011) pointed out that the most crucial component of doctoral programme support is good supervision relationship. However, they also recognized that it is also a challenge to establish one relative to the variations in the student – supervisor expectations as well as the supervisory methodologies. Moreover, Yousefi, Bazrafkan, & Yamani (2015) found out in their study that the existence of undefined tasks and responsibilities of both the supervisor and the student may also bring about glitches in the supervision process. Similarly, a study conducted by Katikireddi & Reilly (2016) found that pressure on the supervision process may exist which is brought about by the variation in the definition of the study between the supervisor and the student possibly leading to *"squeeze on learning spaces' where students' freedom to explore and learn during the dissertation is curtailed—echoing a perceived decline in the intellectual environment experienced by postgraduate nursing students"* (p631). Too much assumption and expectation on the writing capacity of the student from the supervisor may also cause strain and pressure on the part of the students knowing she has to keep up with the *"normalized expectations"* (Starke- Meyerring, 2011, p84). The qualitative literature review presented by Young et. al (2019) identified three themes which were, the quality of the student-advisor relationship, mentorship, and the dissertation process as the potential factors that impact students success in the completion of their study.

Quality of Research Environment:
The environment that the student engages in during the process of dissertation writing also may be a source of challenge and pitfalls. One of the themes that also emerged on the study of Kumwenda et.al. (2017) was nourishing the desire for research wherein the respondents pointed out that moral support from others makes a lot of difference in the process of writing such as in the form of mentoring. Furthermore, Comley- White & Potterton (2018)'s study revealed that two factors which impacts the completion of the dissertation writing experience are research environment and support. In the study, research environment was focused on the setting where data was collected which as described must be

conducive for the conduct of the study while support on the other hand includes provision of protected time or leave of absence to give time for data collection and write – up of the paper. In UK students experienced the challenge of having that feeling of disconnection with the research environment which led them to have a longing to have more chances of connecting with peers in the university (Evans & Stevenson, 2011).

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS, 2015, p2) President, as cited by Carter – Veale et. al. (2016), commented that *"One of the striking lessons from the Doctoral Initiative of Minority Attrition and Completion (DIMAC) is that the dissertation phase is particularly a critical time for students. Our country's STEM workforce will lose a great deal of potential talent if we don't help underrepresented doctoral students cross the finish line."*(p.1)

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE ABD PHENOMENON:
The challenges and pitfalls that affect dissertation writing can be resolved in various ways. Many literatures have been reflective of strategies and interventions which can assist the doctoral student to move from "all but dissertation (ABD)" to "all including dissertation (AID).

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) launched a project called PhD Completion Project, *a seven-year, two-phase project that addresses the issues surrounding Ph.D. completion and attrition.* The project launch a variety of policies and mechanism in institutions that joined in the project comprised of 6 research partners for private institutions and 15 from the public. One of the promising practices is on student selection and admissions whereby the universities implemented proper and organized strategy on screening their enrolees. The admission mechanism utilized here focus on identifying the right match of program for each student.

Mentoring and Advising:
Mentoring and Advising is also a practice that can be implemented. Liza Weber in her published narrative of how she overcame her educational challenges wrote that *"I have learned that when someone cares about the progress you are making and puts forth an effort to support you in your journey, there are very few obstacles that cannot be overcome, and as a result, the support that teachers can provide can improve a student's feelings of academic efficacy and ability to master goal".* As mentioned in the CGS report, establishing a collaborative relationship between the supervisor and the student can lead to successful completion of the PhD. According to Gassman et. al. (2013) as cited by Shaurette (2014), boosting one's confidence in writing helps and this can be achieved through constant practice accompanied by constructive feedbacks provided by the mentor and peers. Furthermore, Wingfield (2011) also reflected that, " *'life happens during postgraduate studies' and the role of having personal support during such times cannot be underestimated when reflecting on the experiences of students"* cited by Comley- White & Potterton (2018,p4)

With the identified concerns on support, working on the program environment can be a way of overcoming these challenges. Creating connections among the students who have the same predicaments of struggling to finish their dissertation can be helpful in away because it helps establish a functional support group. After immersing their participants in the Dissertation Boot Camp where participants were encouraged to have connection with fellow students who are in the process of dissertation writing, Locke and Boyle (2016, p1584) were able to identify 3 themes reflective of the experiences of the students which contributed to their initial progress towards accomplishing their dissertation and move towards graduation which are: *1. Finding support and camaraderie; 2 Providing structure and 3. creating time.* Another study conducted by Carter – Veale at. al (2016) whereby 18 students who are currently enrolled in the advanced PhD graduate program were introduced to the Dissertation House Model. This model introduced the doctoral supervision that would involves multiple mentor across disciplines thus creating a collaborative – learning environment. The study found out that exposing the students to this kind of environment is an effective intervention and has provided satisfaction to the students as well as it has made an impact on their progression.

Likewise, the Council of Graduate School (CGS) in UK initiated the promotion of social interaction across disciplines, involvement of students in various committees as well cascading achievements through various avenues of communication such as newsletters, sponsored dinners and the like. Providing avenues where students can hone their research skills is also one strategy to overcome dissertation challenges. Practice makes perfect and it promotes mastery. The CGS found it as one of their promising practices. They recognized that promoting social interaction set up with a community of research teams and beginning researches in a conducive research environment would motivate students to continue and complete their course.

Administrative and Financial Support:
Since dissertation writing involves use of resources, it cannot be denied then that provision of financial support could motivate the student to complete his dissertation. According to Kumwenda et. al.(2017) failure to obtain scholarships or financial support was an obstacle. One of his respondents stated, *"There is need to have open grants targeting the young researchers and more opportunities for PhDs at younger ages. Also, there is need for capacity building courses,*

and these could be integrated in the grant funding." (Male respondent, Zimbabwe) cited in Kumwenda et. al, 2017. In Africa, only 26.9& of the faculty claimed to have the financial capability to support doctoral students and that majority of the students there exhaust their personal savings and finances to support their doctoral education.

As part of the CGS PhD Completion Project, they have implemented increased student support which covers student stipend, university fellowship and research awards with increase releases as well as realignment of assistantship allocation covering 80% doctoral students and 20% master's students.

Lastly, the role played by administration in supporting the endeavour of students enrolled in their various programs is crucial because they are primarily the driving force which sustains program implementation. One of the recommendations identified by the CGS in improving doctoral completion is to push the administration to take a "proactive role." This was achieved through demonstration of leadership when it came to identifying areas of improvement and innovation in doctoral completion. The result of this was an increase awareness among faculty members regarding the result of the wide self -study of doctoral completion. Taking this step would motivate the faculty to work hand in hand with administration in improving programs of study thus strengthening retention and completion among doctoral students.

CONCLUSION:
The greatest challenge in studying is completion. Taking and finishing a doctoral degree can be prestigious but the challenges behind it can also become so overwhelming that it deters one from finishing the race.

Dissertation writing is a tough challenge especially for students who are not well prepared not only in terms of knowledge but more so with the drive to go through the tough process but with increase self – efficacy, stronger internal locus of control and avoidance of the self – handicap phenomenon coupled with constant practice and innovation, one may not be far from finishing the race.

Avoidance of attrition and being stuck in the realms of "ABD" necessitates a collective effort among administration, faculty and the students.

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